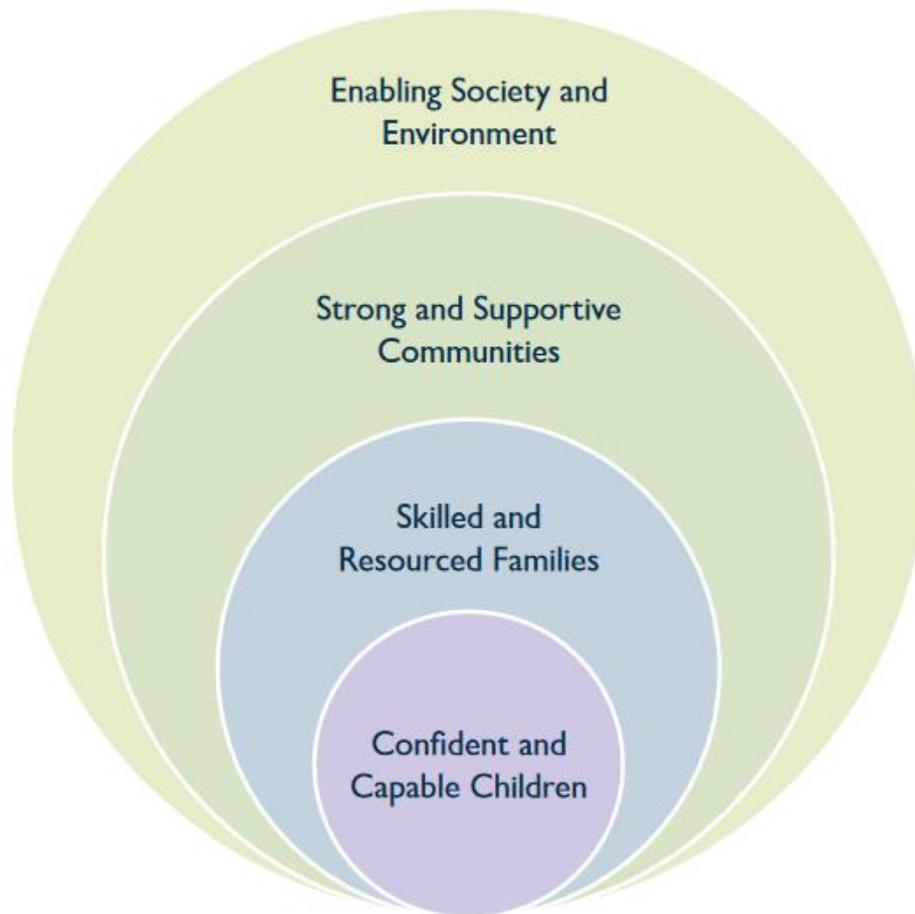


## **About us:**

The Northern Children's Network (NCN) is a community based, not for profit organization providing child care services throughout Tasmania. NCN is governed by a committee of volunteer community members. 46 years ago NCN started as a community based Family Day Care scheme. Since our commencement in Launceston in 1975 we have expanded to offer Family Day Care around the state, with offices in both Hobart and Launceston and educators in all four regions of Tasmania. As we have grown our range of services has grown with us. NCN now operates eight early learning services around Tasmania. We have services in Beaconsfield, Bicheno, Campbell Town, Queenstown, Scottsdale, St Marys, Triabunna and Whitemark (on Flinders Island). These services provide both early education and school aged care through our long day care and outside school aged care services. In addition to our early learning services we also run five outside school hour services; four on school sites and one stand-alone service that runs from our Launceston premises and offers pickup from a number of schools. Our stand alone services operate from; Evandale Primary School, Hagley Farm Primary School, Invermay Primary School and Westbury Primary School. In December of 2020 we had almost 1500 children enrolled in our services across Tasmania. NCN is committed to making high quality early learning and school aged care available to all children across Tasmania and, as our philosophy states "helping create confident children".

## **The Tasmanian Child and Youth Wellbeing Framework**

In child care we often talk about "putting the child at the centre" from setting up learning environments to child focused curriculums to Bronfenbrenner diagrams for designing and evaluating support systems. Keeping the focus around the child ensures everything is aimed at improving children's lives and we do not get distracted from our goals by the myriad of other priorities we may have. The diagram on page four of the framework spoke to us as educators, particularly as our own philosophy is reflected within it. NCN reviewed the document and the discussion paper with staff from across our services and decided to focus on the parts that we most often encounter, specifically questions 12 – 37, and how our interactions, both personal and professional, with the initiatives mentioned have shaped our understanding of the effectiveness of these initiatives.



*Figure 1: The ecological Model of Human Development from Tasmanian Child and Youth Wellbeing Framework page 4.*

## **Discussion Paper**

### Aboriginal Child and Youth Wellbeing (Questions 1-3)

While we support and provide care to children of Aboriginal descent we have little interaction with programs and initiatives aimed specifically at aboriginal families and don't feel comfortable providing feedback in this section.

### A vision for the Child and Youth Wellbeing Framework (Question 4)

The six focus area statements provide a solid guide to how children and youth should be treated. We tried imagine what a child who has this framework growing up might look like in the future to create a unifying vision. We concluded that we would like to see:

Children supported to grow and develop into the best versions of their own unique selves.

*Helping create confident children*

This is our vision for the child and youth wellbeing framework.

### Communities with Specific Needs (Questions 5-11)

While we do have contact with some of the specific communities mentioned there are no specific State supports, initiatives or programs that we access. In order to support the communities mentioned in question five the most useful initiatives for us would be programs that help with translation for multicultural parents. Many parents get by in day to day life, but when it comes to reading and understanding documents for childcare, especially legal requirements such as Complying Written Agreements and Child Care Subsidy forms, they often struggle or may just sign without understanding. This can lead to financial issues further down the track which often makes things harder for families who are already struggling financially and are just trying to do the best for their children. If translation initiatives already exist, they need to be more widely available in rural and remote areas and better communicated to both communities who have participants with English as an additional language and to those essential services with which they will be interacting.

### First 1000 Days (Questions 12-13)

There are four main initiatives that we believe would help support children and families in this period:

1. Access to 1 day of free child care (6.5 hrs. 8.45 – 3.15) per week
2. Child and Family Learning Centres situated around the state, not just in areas of disadvantage.
3. Allowing children to access other services through their child care, without requiring parents to always be present.
4. Government funded meals for children in care.

Access to free child care: child care is not just about watching children and allowing parents to work. All educators are trained in early childhood education, with a majority of educators at a centre having a Diploma in Education and Care at a minimum. Children who attend child care perform significantly better at school in their behavior, social interactions, and emotional maturity as well academically (Bakken, Brown & Downing, 2017). However we find parents are often under the impression that we are just there to watch their children and that children gain no additional benefits from attending. We need a cultural shift away from parents feeling they have to do it on their own or that grandparents are the equivalent of childcare. By no means do we wish to belittle or in any way diminish the contributions of families. They are children's first teachers and have a huge impact on their lives - they are now and will always be important, but there are some skills children learn more effectively care then in their own family (for example socialisation, how to make friends, experiencing and respecting other cultures, respecting other families' values and developing their own identity). We need to change the way we think of child care, from a place that watches children to a valuable learning and developmental experience for all children. Providing 1 day of free care will encourage all families, regardless of socioeconomic status to send their children to at least one day of early learning a week. High quality child care experiences nurtures children's brain development and allows them to capitalize on the important first 100 days (Sharrock & Parkerson, 2019).

*Helping create confident children*

Child and Family Learning Centres [CFLC]: These centres are a fantastic government initiative and are helpful to all parents, not just those in low socioeconomic areas. A number of staff, who went through their first pregnancy, extolled how helpful having the CFLC was, even as experts in child care. Having and looking after your first child is a very different experience than looking after other people's children. Staff have mentioned that had they not worked, or heard from work about the CFLC's, they probably wouldn't have gone to them as they thought they were for people who didn't know what to do. CFLC's existing as a service to all needs to be better advertised and all children would benefit from their continued proliferation around the state.

Allowing children to access other services through their child care, without requiring parents to always be present: many parents who work use child care in order to allow them to enter or stay in the workforce. This means that they may not be available for weekly speech therapist sessions, or to attend pre-kinder, or Leap into learning [LiL]. While some schools and therapists will work around these limitations and drop of/or pick up children, or allow the child care service to attend, others will not. There needs to be a concerted effort to ensure that children do not miss out on these services because their parents cannot afford to skip a day of work each week. One service does not usually replace another even if there are similar goals, and children should not be missing out on school preparation, or developmental help just because their parents can't afford to attend the sessions needed in person.

Government funded meals for children in care: As has been identified by the government, nutrition is an important factor for children's development, especially their brain development. Services frequently send home information packs, but the reality is we cannot force parents to buy what we recommend, and in our rural and remote services it is not feasible for us to supply this food ourselves. An initiative that looks to supply children in care with healthy appropriate food will do significantly more to ensure the adequate nutrition of our children than a hundred letters home about what to pack in a lunch box.

#### Tasmanian Children and Young People are Loved and Safe (Questions 14 – 17)

There are four initiatives in this area upon which we are happy to provide feedback:

1. Intensive Family Engagement Services
2. Strong Families Safe Kids Advice and Referral Line
3. Child Health and Parenting Service
4. B4 Early Years Coalition

Intensive Family Engagement Services: whilst we have worked with families who have successfully accessed these services, in general we find that they ineffective. This is not usually the fault of the service but the program only works if the family is sufficiently invested in its success. The parents need to be held accountable for their actions and the agreed upon terms and the successful end of an IFES engagement needs to involve not only the provider but also the services that have been involved in helping the family find a solution. More than once we have contacted an IFES provider about a family, only to be told that they are no longer working with them. The family had moved on to another provider when their original case closed and we were not contacted because the family already had childcare and it was no longer a service that needed to be arranged for them. This leaves us in a situation where we are trying to support a family about which we have concerns, but no way to contact

their other support services. We need to be more collaborative and even more responsive to their needs when helping families who have come to us from a traumatic background.

**Strong Families Safe Kids Advice and Referral Line:** This is another service with mixed reviews. Essentially we believe that more training is needed for the first points of contact. A lot of the time educators feel like they are reporting a problem including suspected abuse or neglect, and finding the solution is being put back on them “What are you willing to do?” This is not an area they have training in and they perceive calling the line is ticking a box on their mandatory duties as opposed to seeking help for a child. Reference numbers are also not always given even when asked, despite being told by the SFSK outreach people that we would always be given one if the call was about a specific child. However when we do get a single point of contact for a case we find SFSK works well. They are understanding, easy to work with and easy to reach.

**Child Health and Parenting Service:** We have universally had good experiences with CHaPS. They recommend children attend care for the child’s benefit, work with us and share information (with consent), are collaborative, and usually happy to provide some professional development to new staff. Our only suggestion for improvement would be the implementation of a check at the three year old mark as a lot can change in the 2.5 years between ages 18 months and four years.

**B4 Early Years Coalition:** We hear a lot of information about the B4 coalition through work and professional development opportunities and we value and support the work they perform. However we rarely hear about them from parents or expecting mothers in our communities. We believe that more exposure for this program is needed for new and expecting mothers so that they can be informed by the program and act on its information as soon as possible. B4 is visible in the sector but it needs to be more visible in the community.

#### Tasmanian Children and Young People have Material Basics (Questions 18-21)

Oral Health Services Tasmania runs good programs and they are always helpful and on message with children, however services frequently do not know how to contact them to organise learning experiences for their children. We believe that more outreach is necessary so that all children are included. We find that early learning is often expected to be involved by schools, who do not always have the time to do so. While we may all be involved in children’s learning, Services and Primary schools are individual entities and it is not always possible or desirable to treat them as a single location.

The No Interest Loans Scheme is not something that NCN as a whole has had a lot of interaction with, however at a recent Centre Leaders Meeting it was identified as a program that has a very good reputation in their communities. NILS is valued in these regional areas and always highly regarded.

#### **Additional Programs Needed:**

**Shoes for young children.** Many parents are not aware of the damage wearing too small or too large shoes can do to a child’s feet. The affordability of shoes should not be the deciding factor of children’s new shoe purchase and size.

**Community Toy library:** Promoted as sustainable practice, these would be about sharing toys in those years where children’s interests change as they develop. Providing a wide variety of quality toys and

resources for the early years that parents can access at no cost, promoting positive early learning experiences for all children, not just those who can afford toys that will no longer be used in 3 months.

#### Tasmanian Children and Young People are Healthy (Questions 22 – 25)

As educators of children, this is a topic of frequent discussion. It was very interesting to see Breastfeeding Coalition Tasmania in the current initiatives as many were not aware that they were still active. While breastfeeding is still viewed as important and is known to be occurring with new mothers, the coalition has dropped from visibility. It is felt that this program should be made more visible again as this isn't an issue that should be allowed to fade into the background.

The government immunization programs appear to be going well but we recommend that more be done to educate parents on how vaccines, in general, work as there is a lot of misinformation out there and parents often treat vaccine information on an individual basis (i.e. MMR vaccine is good, but the Flu vaccine will make your child sick anyway, so you might as well save the money). Information on when and why symptoms of an illness may show even after being vaccinated would also be helpful in combatting negative perceptions of vaccines.

The Perinatal and Infant Mental Health Service was unknown to most of our services but on reading about it in the discussion paper it was identified as an important program that was needed in more communities. If it is achieving positive results in Hobart than it should be expanded to cover more of the State as there is a need.

The Government healthy eating programs contain a lot of good information that is easy to read and understand. However, parents are time poor and while they may agree their child should eat healthily, they will give them the food that is easiest for them to prepare. We propose a program with supermarkets where a variety of healthy affordable lunchbox packs are available to buy or put together (like a pick and mix). This would allow parents the convenience they seek while shopping with children, and would provide real world examples for those who struggle to change their shopping practices.

In general we find that programs receive a better reception if they are more than just ideas. Combined initiatives, physical activity and healthy eating, work well and give a more holistic view of what being healthy involves.

With the prevalence of screens in today's society we also believe we need to do more around educating families around screen time. Specifically, what counts as screen time and why excessive screen time is detrimental to children. There are many views on this topic in the communities and even as amongst educators. Having a clear message would make enacting programs around screen time more effective.

#### Tasmanian Children and Young People are Learning (Questions 26 – 29)

As we mentioned in the first section we believe the CFLC's are an invaluable resource to parents and their presence in Tasmania should be increased. The LiL program is also a fantastic initiative and ensures children make the best start into their schooling. We do feel however, that it would be in children's best interest if all LiL programs were open to services to visit. I feel comfortable saying services are always happy to collaborate with schools in order for their children to be involved in these

programs, while we offer many of the same services LiL offers a program that is linked to the school and their own learning philosophy.

The working together for three year old program is supported by NCN and we look forward to its continued roll out across the state. Due to the NQF requirements for participation in the program we believe services in an area where WT3 is being rolled out should be given advance notice so that they may apply to be reassessed in any area where they might fall short on paper. As reassessment costs money, many centres will wait for their mandatory assessment rather than pay to have a minor issue corrected.

The LIFT program is reported to be a valuable and inclusive program by our services working with schools. The only other Learning initiative we would like to see is a program to increase available venues for early childhood programs. In some situations we host playgroups or other community programs, however we are constrained by our approved numbers, some form of waiver that would allow services to regularly host other groups without restricting numbers could work, alternatively public venues in regional areas that take in the needs of early childhood children would also work.

#### Tasmanian Children and Young People are Participating (Questions 30 – 33)

There were only 2 projects in this section of the paper that we would like to discuss:

1. Discovery Ranger
2. Ticket to Play

Discovery Ranger is an effective, well-run program that children enjoy and plays an important role in educating children about our national parks. However, it is not widely publicized and is usually only known to those who live near a national park.

Ticket to Play is an initiative that is a good idea in theory but has not been well executed in practice, in our opinion. Firstly, Ticket to Play did not tend to attract new young people to teams. Instead it subsidised those who already played. This is a benefit in itself as, with the past and future financial outlook, without subsidization many may have been forced to quit playing. Secondly, the Facilitators were over worked and poorly supported. Many parents dropped their children off at club sports whether the children wanted to play or not, effectively using the clubs as free childcare. The facilitators were not trained to deal with these children and this disrupted the sports for everyone. The idea is good but more effort needs to be given to training the facilitators and setting some universal rules that they can enforce without feeling like they are going against the spirit of the Ticket to play initiative, getting young people participating in club sports.

#### Tasmanian Children and Young People have a Positive Sense of Culture and Identity (Questions 34 – 37)

In the early childhood spaces this can be a very tricky topic to navigate. We find programs give a lot of restrictions (don't dot paint, don't use boomerang symbols) but not a lot of positive ideas of what to do whilst simultaneously saying it is better to do something than nothing. We believe that the Tasmanian community has to come together and create a curriculum for culture and Identity that we want children to learn. The Victorian Early Years Framework already does this and a similar alteration of the EYLF for Tasmania could be the answer here.

While Liaison officers and various programs can provide support and occasional visits, they are overworked and don't always have the time to become a regular presence. They also tend to concentrate on school aged children and not under 5's. This is true for many outside experts and is a continuing problem for early childhood, where people assume that the learning pathway of a three year old is the same as that of a six year old. Officers with training across all age groups would be of benefit for all cultural and identity officers. Alternatively, Outside of Regular hours training (Saturday, after 6PM weekdays) would allow educators to adapt knowledge to their specific age group and ask pertinent questions of an expert.

## Conclusions

While many of the programs in the discussion paper are successful they are not very visible and are often aimed at the older age group. We believe there is a real need to expand the initiatives named above and to overall increase the visibility of the programs. Many of the programs are only known to use through friends, through random happenstance (meeting at a professional learning day and spread through our network internally), or through answering discussion papers such as this one. The programs need to be more visible in regional Tasmania in order to ensure they are reaching all Tasmanians. We also conclude that more effort needs to be made to contact Early Learning Centres and not rely on the trickle-down effect of nearby schools. While it is always the aim for ELC's to have strong relationships with Primary schools, for issues as important as those covered by this framework we should not be relying on anything less than a certainty.

## References

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